Winn Ranger District: Biomass Utilization

In areas throughout the Winn Ranger District of the Kisatchie National Forest in Louisiana, this project reduced hazardous fuels by using both prescribed fire and mechanical treatments. The project reduces the risk of wildland fire to public and private lands and increases safety for firefighters involved in suppression operations in the wildland/urban interface.

Adjacent to Saline Lake on the west side of the district are many recreational homes with special use permits and cabins on private property along the lake and adjacent to the Forest Service boundary. A large fuels buildup in the understory and midstory had created a very hazardous wildland/urban interface situation. Other locations, including a church, a rural fire department, and a state prison, also contained a similar buildup of hazardous fuels. District prescribed burn records showed no history of these lands being burned to reduce fuel loading.

Previous mechanical methods used to reduce fuels included a machine called a “Woods Gator,” which is effective at getting aerial fuels down, but then the ground fuels increased. This created a safer burning environment, but the increase in ground fuels still was a problem. Contract rates ranged from $135 to $175 per acre for the machine and operator, plus contract administration of $8 to $20 per acre to burn the area.

This year a logging contractor who uses skidders, shears, and chippers to reduce the fuel loading removed understory and midstory fuels by shearing vegetation, skidding it to a landing, and then chipping it and trucking the material off site. The contractor has salvage rights to the chips, and sells them to a mill as a fuel alternative to natural gas. The contract cost is $2 per acre plus administration of $8 and prescribed burning of $20 per acre. Total cost is only $30 per acre!

In FY04 over 3,000 acres were treated that satisfied goals of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and HFRA. Acres treated mechanically for the past two years total over 6,000 acres. The resulting appearance of the treated areas is an open park-like condition. These areas, once considered high complex burn areas, can now be safely and effectively burned without unnecessary resource damage.

This project has pulled together complementary goals of fuels reduction, biomass utilization, resource protection, and reduced risk, and improved safety.